

# THE LETTERS OF ST. MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE

*“He has given me to understand that His Sacred Heart is the Holy of Holies, the very sanctuary of love. He wishes that It be now recognized as the Mediator between God and men. He is all-powerful to bring them peace, turning aside the just punishments our sins have drawn upon us and obtaining mercy for us.”*

—St. Margaret Mary Alacoque  
Letter 36  
(Page 50)



ST. MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE  
1647-1690  
Religious of the Order of the Visitation

# THE LETTERS OF ST. MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE

*Translated from the French of  
the revised Gauthey edition of 1920 by  
Fr. Clarence A. Herbst, S.J.*

*“The thoughts of His Heart are to all generations: to  
deliver their souls from death and feed them in famine.”*

—The Roman Missal  
Feast of the Sacred Heart  
(Psalm 32:11, 19)

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“If only you knew how much I feel drawn to love the Sacred Heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ! It seems to me life has been given me only for that. . . . He has strengthened me in the conviction that He takes great pleasure in being loved, known, and honored by His creatures. This pleasure is so great that, if I am not mistaken, He promised me that all those who are devoted and consecrated to Him will never be lost. Since He is the source of all blessings, He will shower them in abundance on every place where a picture of His divine Heart shall be set up and honored. He will reunite broken families, will protect and help those who are in any necessity and those who approach Him with confidence. . . .”

—St. Margaret Mary Alacoque  
Letter 36  
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# INTRODUCTION

## I

### THE MAIN FACTS IN THE LIFE OF ST. MARGARET MARY

Margaret Alacoque, the fifth of seven children of Claude Alacoque and Philiberte Lamyn, was born at Lhautecour in old Burgundy, now east central France, on July 22, 1647. She was baptized Margaret, adding the name Mary only at the time of her confirmation in 1669. At the age of four she took a vow of chastity, though "I did not then understand what I had done, nor what was meant by the words 'vow' and 'chastity.'" From her earliest years she was tenderly devoted to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin.

Her father died when she was eight. When she was eight and a half, she was sent to the school of the Urbanist Nuns at Charolles, where she received the only two years of formal education she ever had.

At the then early age of nine, she made her first Holy Communion. "This Communion shed such bitterness over all my little pleasures and amusements that I was no longer able to enjoy any of them, although I sought them eagerly." Shortly after this she succumbed to a long illness. "But I fell into so pitiable a state of ill health that for about four years I was unable to walk. My bones pierced my skin. Consequently I was removed from the convent at the end of two years. Since no remedy could be found for my illness, I was consecrated to the Blessed Virgin with the promise that, if she cured me, I should one day be one of her daughters. Scarcely had I made this vow, when I was cured and taken anew under the protection of Our Lady."

Though her father, a royal notary, had been in good financial circumstances, Margaret and her mother were after his death subjected to domestic persecution and captivity in their own home by some of their relatives. This drew the girl more

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and more to mental prayer, and brought her closer to Christ in His suffering. Eventually, her mother again became mistress in her own house and prevailed upon her now seventeen-year-old daughter to consider marriage. This brought about an inner conflict and a struggle began in her soul between the devil and the world on the one hand and Our Lord and her vow on the other. Satan: "Poor fool, what do you mean by wishing to be a nun? You will become the laughingstock of the world, for you will never be able to persevere." Her Savior after the scourging: "Would you take this pleasure, whereas I never had any and delivered Myself up to every kind of bitterness for love of you and to win your heart? Nevertheless, you would still dispute with Me!"

"I had indeed committed great crimes," she writes, "for once during the days of Carnival, together with other young girls, I disguised myself through vain complacency. This has been to me a cause of bitter tears and sorrow during my whole life, together with the fault I committed in adorning myself in worldly attire through the same motive of complacency towards the persons above mentioned."

She was induced against her better judgment to apply for admission into the Ursuline Order at Macon, but was suddenly called home just "as they were ready to open the convent door to me." On May 25, 1671, she paid her first visit to her "'dear Paray,' where, as soon as I entered the parlor, I heard interiorly these words: 'It is here that I would have you be.'" She took the habit August 25, 1671, and made her profession November 6, 1672, as the "first daughter" of the new superior, Mother de Saumaise, who was to figure so largely in her later life.

Christ had carefully prepared His servant for her great mission, through suffering, prayer, and special guidance. Her sufferings were to continue to the end, her prayer would become ecstatic, the Savior Himself would be her personal spiritual director till death. In this way she would be able to present to the world the devotion to the Sacred Heart in its modern form.

Our Lord made many revelations to Margaret Mary—per-



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haps forty. The most striking of these began on December 27, 1673; they ended with the greatest of them all, "Behold this Heart," in June, 1675. It was during this year that Claude de la Colombière, a saintly young priest of the Society of Jesus, was providentially sent to Paray-le-Monial and appointed extraordinary confessor to the Visitandine community of which Margaret Mary was a member. He encouraged and reassured her, and himself became an apostle of the devotion to the Sacred Heart for the few years of life that remained to him. The notes of his *Retreat* made in London in 1677, where he was sent after only eighteen months in Paray, were to be a great instrument in promoting devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Margaret Mary was mistress of novices from 1685 to 1686. Her death came on October 17, 1690. Her body still rests at Paray-le-Monial. The process with a view to her canonization was begun in 1715. She was declared Venerable in 1824, Blessed in 1864, and became Saint Margaret Mary on May 13, 1920.

This brief sketch of her life is continued and expanded in detail in the letters here presented.

C. A. HERBST, S.J.

## II

### ST. MARGARET MARY IN HER LETTERS

St. Margaret Mary was a great saint, and a strong and lovable personality. It is always a privilege and an enriching experience to be taken into the mind and heart of such a person. It helps us to see the dazzling heights to which our human nature can reach by God's help, to appreciate man and evaluate our own worth, and to look more deeply into ourselves. Too often our estimate of ourselves is determined by what we experience most often and most sensibly, namely, our own and others' sorry performance. But there is a joy and an expansiveness, a feeling of triumph, when we realize

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that the ideal which is enshrined in every Christian heart, to love Christ truly and purely, has been achieved. We feel, and rightly, that we, too, somehow have won the victory with the saint. For, just as the natural solidarity of mankind is a basis for a real communion between men, making every human heart rejoice in the achievements of man, so also the solidarity of the members of the Mystical Body of Christ should produce even deeper sentiments of joy when one among them achieves holiness.

St. Margaret Mary's letters, then, lift us out of the dull, drab, and even oppressive world which some would call reality, into the pure, rarefied atmosphere of the really real, the Christian ideal, and show this ideal realized, by God's grace, in a human life. When we return to our ordinary, everyday world after a reading of these letters, we will view everything with purified eyes and heart. Life, seen with deeper faith, will take on new colors, hope and courage will be rejuvenated, and love kindled afresh. Along with this experience will go a deeper penetration of the meaning of Christianity, of its essence which is, in truth, love of Christ. Those who have lived the Christian religion down to its last consequences show us this meaning.

There exists, however, one great obstacle to prevent our deriving these benefits from the letters. The reader may first be struck, then puzzled, and finally even annoyed, wearied, repelled or frightened by the Saint's repeated insistence on her desire for suffering, humiliation, contempt, and her burning eagerness to be buried in an eternal oblivion, forgotten by all creatures. Accordingly, it seemed good to present some introductory remarks which will help to enrich our first reading of the letters, and to avoid a misunderstanding of the Saint's desires for suffering.

Such sentiments really existed in her heart. That they should become so prominent, occupy such a large space in her letters, be repeated even unto tedium, merely shows how deeply they had penetrated her mind and spread through all her thinking. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. Evidence, were it needed, is furnished by the let-

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ters themselves. We hear her yearning to hide herself, revealing her "mortal repugnance" for speaking about herself, and read of her continued sufferings in body and soul.

Her autobiography gives an indication of the nature and extent of her sufferings. In several letters, moreover, the Saint recounts some of them. First, there is the pain in her head, given to her as a share in what Christ suffered from the crown of thorns. Not only was her pain continual, but it often kept her from resting her head on the pillow at night. But this suffering, leading her to spend whole nights in converse with Jesus, was a source of joy. Next, she relates to Mother de Saumaise a particularly painful experience lasting from Epiphany to carnival time. So great was this suffering that "she did not know herself, and there was no consolation or ease for it, and she could neither sleep nor eat and could hardly talk." A similar state of suffering, recurring each year at carnival time, is related to Fr. Croiset. Again, after the first great revelation of the Sacred Heart she had in her side a great and continual pain, put there by Christ Himself. Frequent blood-lettings were tried, giving some little relief but never effecting a complete cure. On that same occasion, a fever seized her. For a long time she bore it in silence. Finally the doctor was summoned. He had to make sixty visits to the patient, believed to be at death's door, before the sickness left her. There were also frequent occasions when God's holy justice imposed great sufferings on her for the sake of sinners. Further, there was the anguish attendant upon the manifestation of the extraordinary mystical graces God bestowed on her. For these graces were regarded as suspect by many. Closely allied with all this was the grief she felt at her inability to have the Sacred Heart devotion accepted by her own community of Paray.

Thus she was not penning pretty fancies, or deluding herself and us with mere pious wishes, when she wrote of her ardent desire for suffering. She lived this desire. Indeed, no matter how great her sufferings, humiliations, and mortifications were, they never did satisfy her burning thirst for the cross. This burning desire was one of "three tyrants that

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dominated her life." She prayed for such sufferings and asked others to do so. The strength of her conviction in this matter shines out with utter clarity in her strong refusal, despite her tender love for the nun, to pray that Sr. Payelle be relieved of the cross or even of her repugnance for it. God, it seems, had destined St. Margaret Mary for a life of suffering. Like her divine Master, she was "acquainted with sorrow"—and this, too, long before she entered the convent. Under His teaching she learned to embrace it lovingly.

If, instead of turning away from such pages in weariness or in the belief that they present an unsolvable riddle, we turn to St. Margaret Mary herself for an explanation, she provides a satisfactory answer. From her earliest days, even before becoming a nun, she had been filled with the desire of being conformed to Christ in His sufferings. This desire, by her own account, was a work of grace: Christ led her by that way of sanctity and she was powerless to resist. She can speak in glowing terms of "the precious treasure of the cross," "the delicious bread of humiliation and contempt." Men of the world may love honors and riches, but no such lover can surpass her in her love of "the exact opposite of what the world loves and embraces." All suffering, humiliation, and contempt simply brought her closer to her divine Master. For her, generous and noble soul that she was, it was unthinkable that a religious, by her vows a "spouse of the crucified Christ," should desire anything but conformity with Him. This thought in all its fulness gripped her; its implications flowed naturally and easily into her very life. It is not enough to say that her affections were deeply engaged. They were, of course—but the desire to be like her crucified spouse went further, into her very life and being. So true is this that it is difficult, in the influence of thought and desire on her life, and of life on her thought and desire, to tell which comes first. "We must try," she tells us, "to make ourselves living replicas of our crucified spouse by portraying Him in ourselves in all our actions; nothing so unites us to the Sacred Heart as the cross; we want to be true replicas of Him suffering and dying for love of us." It is easy to see why she

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who so ardently desired likeness to her suffering and crucified Lord, should be given as a special patron St. Francis of Assisi, the first Saint recorded to have the stigmata.

But there is something deeper still in the soul of St. Margaret Mary. Under this desire for complete conformity with her crucified Savior, supporting it, feeding it, is the burning desire for what she calls pure love. This eagerness for pure love was an "imperious desire," "a tyrant" who left her no peace and never said "enough." This love, to be pure, had to be completely empty of self, without alloy, a love of preference, persisting in the midst of aridity, suffering, and desolation. It is a totality in loving; for Christ wishes an undivided heart, nothing half and half, all or nothing. There is to be no bargaining, for Christ will either take all or leave all.

A word of warning must be uttered here: St. Margaret Mary is speaking of the exigencies involved in a call to very high sanctity. Hence, the reader must not draw the wrong conclusion from the attitude here ascribed to Christ. Our Lord will certainly receive whatever a soul, sincerely striving to please Him, may offer, even if it does not reach the ideal sketched here by the Saint.

Reflecting on these characteristics of pure love, we understand a little better her constant insistence on suffering, humiliation, being buried in an eternal oblivion and despised by all. She herself often makes this connection: the pure love of God is found in the love of our own lowliness; it requires a complete abandonment to God's good pleasure, no matter what He may do with us. Complete annihilation of self leads to union with Christ. We give Him that total return of love He desires of us by complete abandonment and forgetfulness of self.

The reason underlying the connection is twofold. First, "our damnable self-love is a poison which ruins everything." Self must die, and it dies only through sufferings, humiliations, and by being buried in oblivion. It is self-love which makes us want to do too much, to go on our own, and which forces Christ to leave us on our own. Such conduct is an ob-

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stacle to grace. Since it is so insidious, so prone to tarnish the purity of divine love, it must be eliminated. And only one who has realized its deep, all-pervading influence on our mind and heart can know how slowly and painfully it dies.

The second reason for the connection of sufferings and humiliations with pure love is simply their connection with Christ and His love for us. His love led Him to choose suffering and humiliation as means for man's redemption. To love Him, then, is to love as He loved. There is a mysterious, mystical connection between love and suffering, a connection characteristic of devotion to the Sacred Heart. One must love to come to know it. St. Margaret Mary writes: "True it is that one who loves does not think, even in the midst of the greatest sufferings, that he is suffering anything. But you will surely grant me that no one can love without suffering. The love of my God is a pitiless tyrant who never says 'enough.'" This necessary relation is stated by St. Margaret Mary with a frequency, a clarity, and a conviction that defy misunderstanding.

If we should be tempted to think that St. Margaret Mary's desire for suffering, humiliation and oblivion, arising from her desire for pure love, made her life miserable and unhappy, her letters will set us right. Stemming as it did from a burning eagerness for pure love, an eagerness which is this pure love itself, the desire for suffering and its satisfaction in actual suffering brought to her joy and happiness and peace. Again there is here a mysterious connection. Again, only one who has experienced it can assure us of it. St. Margaret Mary does so in terms that are anything but obscure. We should desire to live only for the happiness of suffering for love. Sadness or joy, health or sickness, are now all one for the heart that loves. For such a heart, in loving God, loves what God loves, prefers it to all else, even as it prefers God. And so, with the rigorous logic of love, St. Margaret Mary can conclude: If God is pleased, that should be sufficient for us. There is no longer any suffering for those who love Christ ardently, because the sorrows, humiliations, contradictions,

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all that is most bitter to nature, are changed into love in this adorable Heart.

Love brings peace. The gift of self in pure love for the Sacred Heart establishes in our hearts His reign of love and peace. So closely are this love and peace connected that the enemy of peace is the very same enemy of pure love mentioned above: self-love, leading to that useless reflection on self which troubles and upsets our souls. The way to peace is the exercise of pure love, a complete abandonment to God's will. God makes His abode only in the peace of a soul whose love is strong enough to love its own lowliness and annihilation. This love is a love of suffering out of love for Christ. Again and again the Saint tells us that she has in her heart an unchangeable, an immovable peace, which is an effect of pure love. This peace is the work of God within her. Indeed, in the midst of very great bitterness, she finds the joy of this unchanging peace which stems from her desire to belong to God and to count as naught the praise and blame of men. This peace is closely connected with devotion to the Sacred Heart. Christ establishes the reign of His peace in our hearts. Moreover, St. Margaret Mary tells us how to obtain this peace in the Sacred Heart: by real, practical love.

We have here the rich personal synthesis of St. Margaret Mary's spiritual life. It was, however, her own "way," a way that Christ, who fashions each saint differently, led *her*. For there are, of course, many ways to holiness. What St. Margaret Mary gives us is a statement, in her own fashion, of the teaching of the two great doctors of total abnegation, St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. John of the Cross.

That the deep spiritual life of a Christian and a saint should mean love of one's own abjection, of suffering, and of humiliations in order to be conformed to Jesus crucified, that this is one form of the pure love of Christ, is nothing astonishing for those acquainted with the Gospel and Christian tradition. That this true love, divine charity, should issue in the inward effects of joy and peace is precisely the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. The other inward effect of love which he notes—mercy—is best considered jointly with the external

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effect of true love—beneficence. We are not surprised to find these effects, mercy and beneficence, in St. Margaret Mary. Her mercy was for souls redeemed by Christ, for sinners, and her beneficence was truly munificent: to do good to souls spiritually, to give them the spiritual alms of prayers, penances, and sufferings borne in reparation for their sins. The will and testament Christ asked of her, given cheerfully and generously, is witness enough here. How closely all this likened her to the Sacred Heart, Who being rich became poor that by His poverty we might be enriched, and how characteristic it is of devotion to the Sacred Heart, requires no elaboration. Christ seems to have given her a deep, mystical sense of her own nothingness, unworthiness, and weakness in order to make her realize her solidarity with sinners and thus to pity and help them.

It is possible, because of the lack of literary polish in her writings, because of her deliberate self-effacement, to fail to appreciate the strength of mind and character of St. Margaret Mary. Even so keen an observer of human nature as William James has fallen into this trap, though perhaps he did not have all the evidence to work on. Certainly Margaret Mary was no "intellectual," but of her intelligence and wisdom, soundness and balance of personality, there is no end of evidence.

Her judgment was firm, clear, and prudent. These qualities shine forth in her spiritual advice to others. She never hesitates in counselling the way of pure love through love of our own lowliness. This is a sure way of perfection, one that can be, and is, stated clearly, briefly, and incisively. Her practical advice is nearly always qualified by the phrase "as God will give you the light to see," or "according to obedience." It takes a prudent person to realize the necessity of intellectual light in others who are to follow advice: we cannot make up a set of rules that will apply to all cases. Indeed, her practice of obedience and her inculcation of it in others is clear evidence of discretion. Her perfect comprehension of the laws of grace and nature, and of their inter-



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play in promoting devotion to the Sacred Heart, together with the exquisite simile she uses to illustrate this point, reveal balance, penetration, and a patience with others which are the very opposite of an hysterical mono-ideism. Strength of mind is reflected in her insistence on total abnegation.

The energy of her will appears in the letters, both in reference to her unflagging pursuit of pure love and in her indomitable effort to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart. This energetic will is steel, not iron. It can bend to circumstances without yielding its endeavor for the goal; it can be content with the best which the present moment can produce, all the while planning future victory. It is ruled by the knowledge that it is an instrument in the hands of God, working for His glory, dependent on His strength. Allied to this energy is her candor of soul.

The warmth of her heart, not, perhaps, to be detected by a superficial reading of the letters, is seen in her affection for Mother de Saumaise and Mother Greyfié, in her gratitude to them, and in her keen interest in all that concerned them. Many sought the friendship of St. Margaret Mary, and, true sign of genuine emotion and emotional balance, she was able to give and receive friendship. We know that her novices loved her dearly. A person without genuine emotion cannot win the affection of children. St. Margaret Mary loved the children to whom she taught catechism before she became a nun, and was loved by them in return. She had a tender heart for the poor and, when she was a young girl, strove to assist them in their difficulties.

The fact that she was chosen mistress of novices is proof positive of her perfect balance and of the confidence her superiors placed in her judgment and tact. She also was elected twice to fill the role of assistant to the mother superior. This office calls for patience, prudence, a fine combination of gentleness and firmness, and an ability to deal with others. Those who are acquainted with the qualities of Mother Greyfié, "the great superior," will not hesitate to accord decisive weight to her testimony about St. Margaret Mary's natural gifts: "Na-

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ture endowed her with sound judgment, prudence, and good sense, as well as with a pleasing personality and a heart full of kindness. In a word, it can be affirmed that she ranked amongst those best fitted to succeed in any undertaking, if Our Lord had not heard her prayer to remain unknown and hidden in lowliness and suffering."

Her superiors had the Saint submit her extraordinary mystical experiences to the judgment of competent spiritual guides. These men found her of sound mind, deep humility, and burning love of Jesus. Time and again they assured her that she was being led by the Holy Spirit. Fr. Croiset, in particular, wrote of her: "God gave her an abundance of good sense, sound, shrewd, and penetrating judgment, a noble soul and a great heart." Could we ask for more? In canonizing her, the Church has set the seal of its approval explicitly upon her sanctity, her heroic virtue. But, surely, we may conclude from this that she also possessed sound judgment. Every virtue, as St. Thomas teaches, in order to be a virtue, must in some way be governed by the virtue of prudence.

In conclusion, we might ask why Christ led St. Margaret Mary along the path of suffering and humiliation.

He Himself told her that He was preparing her to be the apostle of devotion to the Sacred Heart. The revelations and apparitions which she was to receive, in order to accomplish Christ's designs, were many and great. To prevent any pride on her part, Christ prepared her by suffering. Suffering borne in a deep spirit of faith gives man an experimental knowledge of his weakness and nothingness. We know from the Encyclical on the Mystical Body that the Church is the extension of the Redeemer in time and space: it is meant to portray to the world the life of Christ. May we not see in St. Margaret Mary's sufferings and humiliations the Church portraying Christ in His agony? The Saint had a special devotion to the agony in her Holy Hour devotion every Thursday night. More than once Christ gave her a share in the sorrow He felt in the Garden. We may even suggest that the sorrows of the agony, condensed as they are in the brief

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narrative of the Gospels, are unfolded for us in the more detailed account of her sufferings, much as pure white light, by refraction in a prism, is broken up into the various colors it contains.

JAMES J. DOYLE, S.J.

### III

#### DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART

Lovers of the Sacred Heart will find in these letters much to delight them. Here are recounted in St. Margaret Mary's own words the desires of Christ manifested to her, the apostle and evangelist of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. She lives the devotion before our very eyes. We look into the limpid, crystalline depths of her soul and see her burning love for the Sacred Heart, the consecration of her whole being, body and soul, to Him; her eagerness to please Him solely for His own sake; her ardent desire to see Him loved and honored by all men; her energetic yet prudent efforts to promote the devotion amongst the Visitation Nuns and outside her order. The letters to Fr. Croiset by themselves can stand in evidence here.

We ought to note the explicit mention in her letters of the two chief characteristics of devotion to the Sacred Heart: according to the Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on devotion to the Sacred Heart, *Most Merciful Redeemer*, these are consecration, and the reparation of love and justice.

Consecration is explained by the Pope as the act "by which we offer to the Heart of Jesus both ourselves and all that belongs to us." It is the answer of the creature to the creator's love, and a recognition of the rights of the Sacred Heart's love to our complete dedication to Him. If we turn to the act of consecration to the Sacred Heart given in the Letters (p. 73), and consult the passage in which the Saint explains this consecration (pp. 185-86), we see how closely her thought corresponds to that of the Encyclical. From the

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opening words her act of consecration signifies a total self-oblation in which we offer "our person, our life, our actions, pains and sufferings" to the Sacred Heart in order to procure His honor, love, and glory. In her letters referring to consecration, she speaks repeatedly of "the consecration of our whole being to Him."

The second characteristic of devotion to the Sacred Heart—reparation—is the offering of consolation to Christ in His sufferings, particularly the sufferings caused by man's ingratitude, and the giving of satisfaction for the outrages heaped upon Christ by our own sins and those of others. Thus it is described by Pius XI in the Encyclical mentioned. This notion of reparation often appears in the letters of St. Margaret Mary in connection with an idea peculiar to her: the idea of the two divine sanctities—as she names them—of love and justice. In the third great revelation Christ, recalling His Passion born out of love for men as well as the coldness and indifference He receives in return, asked the Saint to make reparation for this ingratitude as far as she could. In the letters to Fr. Croiset she tells us that this reparation is made precisely to the sanctity of love, and particularly for the lack of love shown to Jesus in the Sacrament of His love. It was in the last great revelation (1675 A.D.) that Jesus asked to have a feast instituted to honor His Heart, and to make reparation for the ingratitude, irreverences and sacrileges men show to Him in the Sacrament of His love.

In rendering reparation to the sanctity of justice, St. Margaret Mary had to "suffer a continual martyrdom." For the holy justice in Christ's Heart tends to reject an impenitent sinner, to leave him to himself in his insensibility to his condition. "Then this holy justice makes me suffer, but especially when it is on the verge of abandoning some soul that is consecrated to the Sacred Heart. He makes me bear the weight of this soul's sins in so painful a manner that there is no suffering in life to be compared to it: for I would gladly cast myself into a burning furnace to avoid it." The effect of this suffering is to appease the divine anger and to win the grace of conversion for the sinner. Christ's merits and satisfaction

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are applied to sinners and, in the phrase of St. Paul, what is wanting in His suffering is made up.

Pius XII has said that devotion to the Sacred Heart is the soul of the Apostleship of Prayer. This Apostleship is an association whose members "seek not only their own salvation but by prayer and sacrifice seek the growth of the Mystical Body of Christ and the spread of His Kingdom upon earth." The members express all this by making the Morning Offering—a prayer with no set formula, whereby one daily offers all his prayers, works, joys and sufferings—everything—in union with the intentions the Sacred Heart has in the Mass. Such an offering makes our whole day a prayer, an act of love for Christ. Is this possible even though most of the time we may not be actually thinking of Christ? For an answer, the reader is invited to turn to the exquisite counsel in the letter to Mother Dubuysson (Letter 94) on how to tell Him we love Him just by loving, for "when we love, everything (we say, do or suffer) speaks, even the most absorbing occupations—all are proofs of love."

The substance of the Morning Offering is here. What a sweet consolation for those who are occupied with external activity to know that each act, each effort, everything, is a proof of love, nay, an ardent word of love, addressed to Him. For, in the words of an ancient prayer to the Holy Spirit, it is God "to whose eyes every heart lies open, and to whose ears every intention of our will speaks." We cannot exaggerate the importance of these brief words of the Saint for our modern world and for the solution of our present-day problem of contemplation versus activity. Indeed, the Saint transcends the seemingly opposed terms of the problem and unites all in a higher synthesis: love. Note how she makes special mention in this place of the crosses that come to us. Later we find the Morning Offering in embryo, and see the deep spirituality it contains. Again, the advice about building a nest for ourselves in this Heart, is something we all can follow. The riches of the Sacred Heart itself, and the foundation of the devotion in Scriptures, appear in the simple and excellent practice recommended on p. 168.

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The basis for the sentiments of confidence and trust which the devotion is to inspire is stated often in words, and still more often is expressed in the very exercise of these sentiments by the Saint herself. Indeed, her very effort to get this devotion accepted—in her own religious order, in her own community of Paray, in the whole church, despite the difficulties, opposition, contradictions it faced—bears eloquent testimony to her trust in the Sacred Heart alone. For, as she tells us, on receiving the commission to spread this devotion, she pleaded with Our Lord to leave her in oblivion, to consider her total inadequacy for such a task, and to seek elsewhere for an instrument more worthy and more capable than she was. Yet she accepted His will and, like Abraham, hoped against hope.

The dawn of the glorious triumph of this devotion, the reward of her trust, she beheld with her own eyes before her death. The full noonday splendor she glimpsed only with the eyes of faith quickened by trust. But to us in the 20th century is given the magnificent privilege of beholding clearly this glorious splendor. Would it be rash to say that the growth of devotion to the Sacred Heart has deeply influenced the dogmatic and devotional life of the Church in modern times? The prominence today of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, which bids fair to absorb the speculative energies of theologians for a long time to come, owes much to this devotion, as Pius XII notes in his Encyclical on the Mystical Body. The practice of frequent and daily communion is definitely bound up with the devotion. The increased devotion to Christ present in the Eucharist, the Eucharistic Crusade, Eucharistic Congresses, have all been stimulated by it. Its influence on the efforts of the laity for perfection prolongs, intensifies, and renders concrete the counsels of St. Francis de Sales. The practice of frequent and daily communion and the increased devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist are the natural fruits of the ardent desire St. Margaret Mary had all her life to receive Holy Communion and to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Her love for the Blessed Sacrament so touched the Heart of Christ that He

## INTRODUCTION

told her that, had He not instituted the Blessed Sacrament before, He would have done so then for her sake alone.

But to use St. Margaret Mary's own words, words which are an echo of her favorite, St. John the Evangelist, who leaned upon the Sacred Heart, if we were to attempt to catalogue the riches of this devotion we would need a very large book.

The revelations of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, of which these letters speak, fall under the heading of private revelation, and it might be good in the reading to be aware of the place and function of private revelation in the life of the Catholic Church.

The term "private revelation" designates any manifestation made by God, either by Himself, or through one of the angels or saints, which falls outside of the official revelation made in Scripture and to the Church up to the death of the last Apostle. This official revelation is formally and explicitly intended for the public at large and carries with it an obligation to be accepted which is both serious and absolute. Private revelation on the other hand need not be intended for the general public, and even when it is, as in the case of the Sacred Heart, it never carries the same weight or character of obligation as the official public revelation. This does not mean, however, that private revelation is a matter of complete indifference and that it can in every case be ignored or accepted simply according to one's taste. For private revelations are given by God to sustain and increase the Christian life of the Church in its members. It comes from the abundance of God's providential grace, and though it is not imposed by law, it can, in certain circumstances, be ignored only to one's spiritual loss.

As in the case of public revelation, the guide in the use of private revelation is the Church, though the manner of guidance, except in the case of disapproval and rejection of a supposed revelation, is much less direct and authoritative. The approval of the Church of a private revelation will be discovered in the use which is made of it in the devotional life of the Church, especially in the liturgy, but principally

## INTRODUCTION

it will be found in the canonization, or official recognition of authentic and heroic sanctity, of the person receiving the revelation.

By the act of canonization the Church does not affirm the historical truth of the revelation made to the saint, neither does she affirm that the saint has narrated the revelation accurately. But canonization indicates the Church's judgment that the saint did not act imprudently in regard to the revelations. For any serious imprudence would tell against the saint's virtue, and would have prevented canonization. Any hasty, ill-considered credence given to some unusual experience would certainly be considered imprudent. A craving for such experiences, a tendency to overestimate their worth in the difficult struggle for perfection, or to put them on a par with, or above, the public revelation of God, would seriously call into question the prudence of the person receiving the revelation. On the other hand, to submit to the judgment of competent theologians and spiritual guides, to test the revelations against the doctrine and life of the Church, to be slow to believe, and, in a religious, to be obedient to the judgment of superiors: these are signs of prudence.

The revelations made to St. Margaret Mary pass every test. Her letters give a constant and repetitious manifestation of her caution, reserve, humility, and obedience with regard to her extraordinary experiences. The devotion to the Sacred Heart, under the stimulus of the revelations made to her, has received the highest liturgical standing in the feasts of the Sacred Heart and Christ the King, and has been the subject of strong exhortation by Popes and Bishops alike. Theologians, too, have made the link between the revelations to St. Margaret Mary and the life and teachings of Christ as contained in the official public revelation. They point out that Christ, though the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, was a true man of flesh and blood, and possessed, therefore, a human heart, and that the human heart is the symbol of love. It was the love of Christ for His Heavenly Father and for all men which motivated every action of His life, especially His redemptive act of sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary. The



## INTRODUCTION

love of Christ was a reparative love and, on the part of men, an unrequited love. To those who would hear, it appealed for response and for reparation, and it called on His disciples to participate through union with His cross within the life of the Church in the redemption of the human race. This is also the sum and substance of the revelations to St. Margaret Mary.

A word here, in conclusion, on how these letters ought to be read. The charm of St. Theresa or the Little Flower is lacking here. But such comparison would be unfair. We are dealing with a different person, and the circumstances of her writing are different. Beneath the superficial aspects of style there is hidden the same message of truth and life. There is much unction here, but it must be discovered by slow, almost meditative reading. Indeed, if we may be permitted the comparison, these letters ought to be read like the Scriptures. Christ Himself promised St. Margaret Mary that He "would join to her writing the unction of His graces, by which He would draw very many hearts to His love." She tells us that "when she writes, she kneels down to do it, like a pupil before his teacher, and writes as Christ dictates to her, without previous reasoning about what she is going to say." A slow, repeated, meditative reading will extract the gold contained in this ore.

JAMES J. DOYLE, S.J.



## IV

### CHRONOLOGY

1647, July 22	St. Margaret Mary born at Lhautecour
1651 (approximately) 1666	Makes vow of chastity Mother Hersant made superior at Paray
1671, June 20	St. Margaret Mary enters the Monastery at Paray
August 25	Receives the religious habit
1672, June	Mother de Saumaise made superior at Paray
November 6	St. Margaret Mary makes her profession as a religious of the Order of the Visitation
1673, December 27	First great revelation of the Sacred Heart
1674	Second great revelation of the Sacred Heart Third great revelation of the Sacred Heart
1675, February or March	Bl. Claude de la Colombière arrives at Paray
June	Last great revelation of the Sacred Heart
June 21	St. Margaret Mary and Bl. Claude de la Colombière consecrate themselves to the Sacred Heart
1676, August	Bl. Claude leaves Paray for London
1678, June	Mother Greyfié made superior at Paray
December 31	St. Margaret Mary makes the solemn testament asked of her by Christ

## CHRONOLOGY

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| 1679              | Bl. Claude returns to Paray for a few days   |
| 1682, February 15 | Bl. Claude dies at Paray   |
| 1684, May         | Mother Melin made superior at Paray  |
| 1685, January 1   | St. Margaret Mary made Mistress of Novices for a period of two years                         |
| July 20           | The first public honor is rendered to the Sacred Heart in the novitiate at Paray             |
| 1686, June 21     | Sr. Madeleine des Escures places image of Sacred Heart in choir for whole community to honor |
| October 31        | St. Margaret Mary makes a vow of perfection  |
| 1687              | Elected assistant to Mother Melin  |
| 1690              | Mother de Chateaumorand made superior at Paray   |
| October 17        | St. Margaret Mary elected assistant to Mother de Chateaumorand                               |
|                   | St. Margaret Mary dies at Paray  |

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The Letters of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque here translated are taken from the second volume of *Vie et Oeuvres de la Sainte Marguérite-Marie Alacoque*, fourth edition, published by the Monastery of the Visitation at Paray-le-Monial in 1920 and following the 1915 edition of Archbishop Gauthey of Besançon. The notes of that edition have, as a general rule, not been translated here, though sometimes the information they contain has been inserted in the text or incorporated in the notes.

In reading these letters, certain facts have to be borne in mind. Margaret Mary had only two years of formal schooling. She wrote letters against her will, under obedience. She was forbidden to re-read them for fear she would tear them up or burn them, and so she could never correct what she had written. But it would have been useless to attempt to revise, for Our Lord promptly obliterated from her memory whatever she was trying to recall, as soon as she had written it down. She had to write what the Spirit of God dictated, and could write nothing else. Her letters were many times interrupted and resumed before they were finally finished.

For these reasons the letters were difficult to translate. Their style is far from elegant, sometimes faulty. The sentences are very long and loosely strung together. Grammar and syntax are not always in keeping with modern usage. Different ideas may be contained in the same paragraph, perhaps even in the same sentence. An undeveloped but important thought may crowd on the heels of another one equally undeveloped and important, inviting confusion. I have broken down the long sentences; but I have tried to preserve the homely, simple, straightforward, familiar style of one writing confidentially of spiritual matters, to intimate friends.

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

These letters are a precious treasure. Nothing gives insight into a soul so clearly as her personal and private correspondence—and Margaret Mary's was a great soul. Christ must have chosen her to introduce into the world devotion to the Sacred Heart in its modern form because her heart was just what He wanted a human heart to be—a heart very much like His own. If those who read these letters catch something of her spirit, and are brought to fashion their own hearts even a little more closely according to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the translator will consider his work richly rewarded.

I should like to express my gratitude to the Sisters of the Monastery of the Visitation at Paray-le-Monial in France for the permission to use their edition, and to the Sisters of the Monastery of the Visitation at Roselands, Walmer, Kent, England, for great help in checking this translation.

C. A. H., S.J.

# THE LETTERS OF ST. MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE

*“May the sacred fire consume our hearts unhindered and  
make of them thrones worthy of a holy love.”*

—St. Margaret Mary Alacoque  
Letter 2  
(Page 2)



## LETTERS

[1]

**To Mother Marie-Françoise de Saumaise, at Dijon** <sup>1</sup>

Vive † Jésus! <sup>2</sup>

[*End of June*] <sup>3</sup> 1678

MOST HONORED AND DEAR MOTHER,

It was not without mortification nor from lack of friendship that I chose to deprive myself of the sweet consolation of writing to you and telling you that I shall always have the same esteem for Your Charity. Since you are well aware that our good Master has intimately united my heart and yours, I am not at all afraid that they will ever be separated except by Himself. Since words fail me to express the gratitude I feel for your motherly tenderness, it must suffice to say that I shall continue to remember it in quite a special way before Our Lord. I beg Him to bestow on you His most precious graces and loving caresses during this wonderful time of retreat. I am sharing its delights with you.

A word about the blessings with which His goodness is favoring me at present. I can only describe them by saying that my whole life, body and soul, is nothing but a cross. Yet I cannot complain, nor do I desire any other consolation than that of not having any in this world and of living hidden away in Jesus Christ crucified, suffering and unknown, so that no one will have any compassion on me nor remember me except to increase my suffering. I flatter myself, dear Mother, that you are too interested in me not to rejoice at this. Thank Our Lord who, after Himself, has nothing more precious than His love and His cross. By His mercy He shares them with me. I know I am most unworthy of such precious gifts; unworthy, too, of the one He has given us in the person of our most honored Mother.<sup>4</sup> I cannot sufficiently express my esteem and affection for her and my perfect confidence in her charity. I have already experienced this charity many times, and can assure you that I think Our Lord will fulfill His promise through her.<sup>5</sup> I beg Him with all my heart to do

so, in order that He may draw from this all the glory He desires. It was this dear Mother who told me to write at this time. Because of a slight indisposition, and also because you will be overwhelmed with letters just now, I would have put it off. Do not hurry to answer; for no matter how you treat me, I will not doubt your affection for me. In time and eternity, in the sacred love of Jesus, I shall be

Sister Margaret Mary  
Blessed be God! <sup>o</sup>

[2]

**To Mother de Saumaise, at Dijon**

*July 10, 1678*

MOST HONORED MOTHER,

May the sacred fire consume our hearts unhindered and make of them thrones worthy of a holy love. I have too often experienced your goodness to think that my silence makes you doubt the affection and respectful friendship I have for Your Charity. You have drawn me to love you in more ways than I can express. My silence will speak better, dear Mother, than my words.

I think you already know the occupation to which obedience has put me. May Our Lord be blessed in everything, since nothing can stop us from becoming wholly His. Yes, dear Mother, the Lord is indeed good in continuing always to show the same kindness and mercy towards me, His unworthy slave, regardless of my infidelities and weaknesses so well known to you. Help me to thank Him for these and for all His other gifts. The one I cherish most, after Himself, is the precious treasure of His cross. It accompanies me everywhere, interiorly and exteriorly. It is the only consolation I have in this life, a life too long and desirable only for the occasion it gives one to suffer, especially those precious humiliations which cause us to be forgotten and despised by men. Happy the souls thus blessed in the service of the Lord!



I beg Him to accomplish His designs in you. When before Him I do not forget you, nor the very honorable Mother Boulrier either. I have a very special esteem for her.<sup>7</sup>

Please recommend to Our Lord the Misses Bisfrand. They are much put out by not getting any more news of Reverend Father de la Colombière.<sup>8</sup> I do not know whether you have forgotten to tell us in your letters what you promised you would or whether you simply thought it better not to do so. I shall always be satisfied and feel the same towards Your Charity no matter how you treat me. Rest assured of this and believe me entirely yours in His holy love.

[3]

**To Mother de Saumaise, at Dijon**

*May, 1679*

I assure you, dear Mother, that I was very consoled at the pleasure you have given the Lord by embracing His cross with joy and submission. He has completely covered it with roses, it is true, lest you be frightened by it. But what really ought to give you the greatest joy is to feel the pricks of the thorns hidden beneath the roses.<sup>9</sup> Then it will please the Lord to make you like unto Himself. Then He will make you see that He is not less lovable in the bitterness of Calvary than in the sweetness of Thabor.

[4]

**To Sister Louise-Henriette de Soudeilles, at Moulins**<sup>10</sup>

*[1679 or 1680]*

MOST HONORED SISTER,

I beg the Sacred Heart of Jesus to deign to consume ours in the flames of His holy love. This love I think it is that induced you to honor with your acquaintanceship one whose

great wretchedness constantly urges her to live unknown and forgotten by men. But if our sovereign Master wills it otherwise, I consider it a great privilege to have a little remembrance from you before Our Lord. He grants me the favor of returning in a very special way the affection which Your Charity shows me, though I am very unworthy of it. God can, however, draw glory from our least actions when He so wishes, and I trust He will obtain glory from the desire His goodness has given you that we share in a special way each other's spiritual goods. I can assure you that I never do anything good, but God in His goodness lets me appropriate the treasure of the truly poor, that is, the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Its infinite riches can amply satisfy our great indigence. We must associate ourselves with this precious Good, placing in this Sacred Heart all the good we can do with the help of His grace, then exchange our hearts for His and offer His to the eternal Father in place of our own.

This adorable Heart, then, beloved Sister, must be the center of our true friendship and our place of retreat. There we can live safe from all storms, and will see and learn to know each other. I assure you that I have already paid you some visits there. I think love has already given you a place of preference in It. I myself am aspiring to one surely, but I have not yet fulfilled the conditions required for entering. These are: a heart that is pure, free from all desire and affection, humble and completely given over to doing perfectly what pure love demands. This love wants to be in full possession so that it can dispose of a heart at will. I beg Him never to let us resist Him, and that our friendship be completely in Him and for Him.

I hope, most honored Sister, that you will be so good as to excuse me for talking to you this way. I cannot but tell you frankly what I think. I have the greatest esteem and affection for Your Charity, and am completely and unreservedly yours, most honored Sister, in His holy love.

As for what you asked me to recommend to Our Lord, I trust He will be glorified by it in proportion as you are sub-

missive and abandoned to His good pleasure, which should strip us of all self-interest if we really want to do His will. If God is satisfied, we ought to be content. I am sure you desire nothing else. Neither do I. So let us love Our Lord and give Him everything without reserve. By this same love I conjure you, beloved Sister, to undeceive yourself in my regard and not to think me to be what I am not.

[5]

**To Mother de Saumaise, at Moulins**

*Around 1680*

I am afraid, dear Mother, that because of my continual resistance to grace I am an obstacle to the glory of the Sacred Heart. I think He gave me to understand how much I shall have to suffer for this same love, and that the graces He has given me were not so much for myself as for those He would send to me. These I must tell simply what He inspires me to. He will add to my words the unction of His grace and draw many hearts to His love. I am always conscious of this when I resist Him.

I am not forgetting you before the Lord. He takes from me the power of writing as I would wish, so that, when I take up my pen, I do not know what to write. I therefore let Him do it and abandon myself to Him. Life is such a heavy cross for me that I have no consolation but that of seeing the Heart of my adorable Savior reign. He gives me the pleasure of suffering something special whenever this devotion makes some new advance. But there is nothing I would not be willing to suffer for that. Even the most bitter sufferings are sweet in this adorable Heart, where everything is changed into love. I would like to be able to avenge on myself all the injuries done my Savior Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. I am, as you know, wholly yours in the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

[6]

**To Mother de Saumaise, at Dijon**

1680

MOST HONORED MOTHER,

To me it is a sweet consolation to receive news of you, though I seem to be indifferent to news from others. You are always my good Mother, for whom the Lord gives me an inexpressibly great affection. Neither can I forget you before God. I beg Him to see to it that all His designs on us are carried out. May it be the same with regard to Madame de N., who is now with us with the view of becoming a religious in accord with her earnest desire of doing God's will. I recommend her to your holy prayers, together with Reverend Father de la Colombière, of whom you ask news from us. He informs Madame de L. that his health is not yet restored. I myself, though, have had no letter from him. It is not that I have not given myself the privilege of writing to him; he simply has not judged fit to answer me. But no matter how he treats me I am always satisfied, because I know we wish only the will of God, to which he is very submissive. This is all the news I can give you of him for the present.<sup>11</sup>

With regard to Communion, I shall under obedience do what Your Charity asks. Would that I could show you my concern in everything that concerns you, for the interests of Our Lord. I know these are dearer to you than anything else.

I leave to others the consolation of sending you the news. I am not good at that. Beg the Lord to make me worthy of accomplishing His will in everything, and that we may be able to love Him above all things. In this love I am completely yours.